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ABSTRACT

While numerous studies on bilingual education have looked at student test scores, drop-out rates, and parental responses, this study looks at the attitudes of the students directly affected by bilingual education. Interviews with a representative sample of 132 elementary school students (grades 4-6) in El Paso, Texas were conducted for this study. Investigating the behaviors and attitudes of children with respect to language use should provide insight into changing linguistic norms of this border community. Questions were designed to elicit students' attitudes toward Spanish and English as well as determine their public and private use of these languages for a variety of purposes and contexts, in addition to eliciting information concerning their sociodemographic and academic background. The bulk of this paper consists of reporting the statistical details of how the students answered numerous questions about their language use preferences, level of proficiency, and feelings about the Spanish language. (KFT)

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Language at the Elementary School*

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The recent political developments in California and Arizona have renewed the debate over bilingual education. While numerous studies have looked at student test scores, dropout rates and parental responses (Stergis (1995), Shin and Gibbons (1996), Schecter et al. (1996) among others), this study looks at the attitudes of the students directly effected by bilingual education. During the 1999 spring semester 132 elementary school students in the 4th-6th grade were interviewed. These students all attend the same elementary school in El Paso, Texas, which is located across the border from Juárez, Mexico. Investigating the attitudes and behaviors of children with respect to language use should provide insight into the changing linguistic norms of this border community. The interview questions were designed to elicit the students' attitudes toward Spanish and English as well as determine their public and private use of these languages for a variety of purposes, and contexts, in addition to eliciting information concerning their sociodemographic and academic background.

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* This paper was originally presented at the annual conference of the Linguistics Association of the Southwest (LASSO) held in San Antonio, Texas in October 1999. I would like to thank the participants for their comments.

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32 fourth graders, 59 fifth graders and 41 sixth graders participated in the survey. Of the 132 students interviewed 73 were girls and 59 were boys. The gender breakdown by grade is given in Table 1. Of the 59 boys, 32 had participated in bilingual education classes. Of the 73 girls, 38 had participated in bilingual education classes.

GRADE	TOTAL	BOYS	Girls
4th	32	16	16
5th	59	26	33
6th	41	17	24
TOTALS	132	59	73

Table 1: Grade and Gender

While 50% of the students claimed to speak Spanish as their first language, 52% of the students interviewed had participated in bilingual education classes. In addition to those whose first language was Spanish, 18% responded that they grew up with both English and Spanish and of these 24 students, 15 participated in bilingual education classes. Not all students whose first language was Spanish participated in the bilingual education program; however 30% of the students whose first language was English were in bilingual education. The figures for participation in bilingual education are given in Table 2.

FIRST LANGUAGE	TOTAL	BILINGUAL ED.	
		YES	NO
SPANISH	65 (50%)	39 (60%)	26 (40%)
ENGLISH	42 (32%)	14 (33.3%)	28 (66.6%)
BOTH	24 (18%)	15 (63%)	9 (37%)
TOTAL	131[1]	68 (52%)	63 (48%)

Table 2: Bilingual Education[2]

The students were asked to rate their level of proficiency in speaking, comprehending, reading and writing Spanish. These responses were compared to participation in bilingual education classes.

PROFICIENCY	EXCELLENT	WELL	FAIR	POOR	NOT AT ALL
SPEAK					
YES Bil.Ed.	15	34	9	7	3
NO Bil.Ed.	18	20	15	6	4
UNDERSTAND					
YES Bil.Ed.	33	25	8	2	0
NO Bil.Ed.	28	17	10	5	3
READ					
YES Bil.Ed.	17	22	14	4	11
NO Bil.Ed.	11	10	13	9	20
WRITE					
YES Bil.Ed.	10	28	10	8	12
NO Bil.Ed.	9	11	2	14	27

Table 3: Spanish Proficiency and Bilingual Education

The students who participated in bilingual education had more students reporting their Spanish skills in all areas at the excellent or well level than those students who did not participate in bilingual education. Both groups reported high ranks for speaking and understanding. 72% of the combined groups felt their comprehension of Spanish was well or above, while 66%

[1] One student's first language was neither Spanish nor English.
[2] Percentages in tables were rounded off. As a result some columns do not total 100%.

felt their speaking ability ranked well or above. However the percentages dropped to 47% and 44% for reading and writing, respectively. See the summary in Table 4.

SKILL	BILINGUAL	NONBILINGUAL	TOTAL
Speaking	72%	60%	66%
Understanding	85%	71%	79%
Reading	57%	35%	47%
Writing	56%	32%	44%

Table 4: Spanish Proficiency Well and Above

In addition to being asked about their language proficiency, students were asked to rate their level of agreement to statements about the value of Spanish for them personally along a five-point Likert scale with responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Results found that the students' attitudes towards speaking Spanish were largely determined by their perceived proficiency in understanding Spanish. When a student felt that they understood Spanish well then they felt proud and lucky to speak Spanish. They also felt it was important to speak Spanish. These results are summarized in Tables 5-6.

UNDERSTAND E/W	PROUD	LUCKY	IMPORTANT
Strongly Agree	59 (57%)	63 (61%)	60 (58%)
Mostly Agree	23 (22%)	25 (24%)	24 (23%)
Neutral	17 (16%)	11 (11%)	16 (15%)
Mostly Disagree	3 (2%)	4 (4%)	3 (2%)
Strongly Disagree	2 (2%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)

Table 5: Understanding Spanish and Attitudes Toward Spanish

Of the 104 students who rated their comprehension of Spanish at excellent or well, 79% agreed that they were proud to know Spanish, 85% felt lucky to know Spanish and 81% felt that knowing Spanish was important. This was not the case for students who rated their understanding of Spanish as fair or lower.

UNDERSTAND F/P/N	PROUD	LUCKY	IMPORTANT
Strongly Agree	8 (29%)	4 (14%)	6 (21%)
Mostly Agree	2 (7%)	9 (32%)	6 (21%)
Neutral	10 (36%)	6 (21%)	12 (43%)
Mostly Disagree	1 (4%)	4 (14%)	2 (7%)
Strongly Disagree	7 (25%)	5 (18%)	2 (7%)

Table 6: Understanding Spanish and Attitudes Toward Spanish

Of the 28 students who rated their comprehension of Spanish fair or lower, less than half agreed with the statements. 36% agreed that they were proud to know Spanish, 46% agreed that they were lucky to know Spanish and 42% felt it was important to know Spanish. For the students who rated themselves for all four language skills (comprehension, speaking, reading and writing) at excellent or well the percentages of those agreeing with these statements were very high. 92% of these 46 students agreed that they were proud of knowing Spanish, 91% agreed with being lucky to know Spanish and 85% agreed that it was important to know Spanish. See table 7.

All 4 Levels E/W	PROUD	LUCKY	IMPORTANT
Strongly Agree	33 (72%)	36 (78%)	26 (57%)
Mostly Agree	9 (20%)	6 (13%)	13 (28%)
Neutral	3 (7%)	2 (4%)	6 (13%)
Mostly Disagree	0	1 (2%)	1 (2%)
Strongly Disagree	1 (2%)	1 (2%)	0

Table 7: All Skills and Attitudes Toward Spanish

However, the student's level of understanding did not correlate with a preference for speaking Spanish. Only 25% of the 104 students who rated their comprehension of Spanish at excellent or well preferred speaking Spanish to English. 9% were neutral as to a preference and 36% did not prefer speaking Spanish, See table 8. Keeping in mind that not all students who rated their comprehension of Spanish as high also rated their speaking skills in Spanish as high. But looking at those 87 students who rated their speaking skills in Spanish as excellent or well, results show that there is not a correlation between speaking skills and preference for speaking Spanish, as shown in Table 9.

Prefer Speaking Spanish	Number of Students Comprehension E/W
Strongly Agree	9 (9%)
Mostly Agree	17 (16%)
Neutral	40 (39%)
Mostly Disagree	19 (18%)
Strongly Disagree	19 (18%)

Table 8: Comprehension Skill and Preference for Speaking Spanish

Prefer Speaking Spanish	Number of Students Speaking E/W
Strongly Agree	10 (11%)
Mostly Agree	18 (21%)
Neutral	34 (39%)
Mostly Disagree	12 (14%)
Strongly Disagree	13 (15%)

Table 9: Speaking Skill and Preference for Speaking Spanish

Only 31% of the 87 students who rated their speaking ability as high agreed with the statement: "I prefer to speak Spanish rather than English.: 34% were neutral on this statement and 25% disagreed with the statement.

Results showed a strong preference for reading in English regardless of which language the students learned to read first, as shown in table 10. This preference for reading in English held for books, magazines and newspapers. Few students reported an

equal preference for reading in both Spanish and English for any of the three mediums.

Reading Preference[3]	1st Read Spanish (56)	English (70)	Both (5)	Total
Books: Spanish	18	0	0	18 (14%)
English	35	65	4	104 (79%)
Both	3	2	1	6 (5%)
Magazines:				
Spanish	7	1	0	8 (6%)
English	31	62	3	96 (73%)
Both	15	1	2	18 (14%)
Newspapers:				
Spanish	7	1	0	8 (6%)
English	28	58	4	90 (69%)
Both	11	2	1	14 (11%)

Table 10: Reading Preferences

There was also a strong preference for watching English language television despite the availability and diversity of Spanish language television in this area. Not only are Spanish language stations available from Mexico, there are two Spanish language TV stations and several Spanish language radio stations in El Paso.

Of the 132 students surveyed, 65 learned to speak Spanish first, 42 learned to speak English first and 24 learned both English and Spanish simultaneously. 63% reported a preference for watching television in English only. While all groups reported at least a 20% rate for watching TV in both English and Spanish, the only group reporting a double-digit (18%) figure for Spanish only was the group whose first language was Spanish.

[3] Not all students reported reading newspapers, magazines and/or books. Three students did not respond to the question of reading preference with respect to books.

1st Language	TV Preference		
	Spanish Only	English Only	Both
Spanish	18%	50%	32%
English	3%	77%	20%
Both	5%	70%	25%

Table 11: TV Preference

Spanish language music is quite popular in El Paso and has seen an increased popularity across the country with the record breaking sales of Latin recording stars such as Enriquez Iglesias and Ricky Martin. It was assumed that music preference would follow along first language lines with Spanish speakers preferring Spanish music. While Spanish language music was preferred by those students whose first language was Spanish, the majority of students preferred English language music. English language music was preferred by not only first language English speakers, but first language Spanish speakers as well.

1st Language	Music Preference		
	Spanish Only	English Only	Both
Spanish	6%	62%	32%
English	0%	62%	33%
Both	13%	58%	25%

Table 12: Music Preference

Despite the strong preference for English in reading, TV and music, the majority of students had positive feelings toward Spanish. The students were asked to respond to the statement "Spanish is a beautiful language." The statement was then repeated with "sophisticated" and "colorful" replacing "beautiful." These positive feelings were held regardless of first language acquired.

The positive values were combined as were the negative values to simplify the data as shown in Table 13.

Language	Positive	Neutral	Negative
SPANISH			
Beautiful	53	8	4
Sophisticated	40	16	9
Colorful	44	12	9
ENGLISH			
Beautiful	28	6	8
Sophisticated	24	8	9
Colorful	28	8	5
BOTH			
Beautiful	15	5	4
Sophisticated	11	3	10
Colorful	16	6	2

Table 13: Semantic Differential Items

In all cases save one, the majority of students considered Spanish to be beautiful, sophisticated and colorful; the one exception being in the both category, where agreed and disagreed on Spanish as being sophisticated were about equal. In each of the three categories of speakers, positive appraisals of beauty and colorfulness exceeded positive appraisals of of sophistication and, conversely, negative appraisals of sophistication equal or exceed negative appraisals of either beauty or colorfulness. All three categories look on Spanish positively, but to significantly different degrees with native Spanish speakers seeing it most positively, native English speakers less so and finally 'native' bilinguals least of all. This ordering is surprising, since both groups of native monolinguals have a more positive view of Spanish than native bilinguals.

Perhaps more important was the reported perceptions of Spanish as a marker of group identity. When asked to respond to the statement "Spanish makes me feel like part of a group," the student's perceived proficiency in Spanish was reflected in their group identity. The majority of students who rated themselves excellent or well in any of the four skills agreed with the statement on belonging to a group; while the majority of students who rated their Spanish language skills as fair or lower disagreed with the statement, as shown in Table 14.

Spanish	Strongly Agree	Mostly Agree	Neutral	Mostly Disagee	Strongly Disagree
Speak					
E/W (88)	45	32	11	0	0
F/P/N (44)	0	0	19	10	15
Read					
E/W (61)	45	16	0	0	0
F/P/N (71)	0	16	30	10	15
Write					
E/W (60)	45	15	0	0	0
F/P/N (72)	0	17	30	10	15
Understand					
E/W (104)	45	32	27	0	0
F/P/N (28)	0	0	3	10	15

Table 14: Spanish Proficiency and Feeling Part of a Group

100% of the students who rated their reading and writing skills at well or above agreed with the statement on knowing Spanish making them feel part of a group. Those students who rated their reading and writing at fair or below either disagreed or were neutral on this statement. 35% of the students who rated their writing and or reading as poor or lower disagreed with the statement while 42% remained neutral.88% of the students who rated their speaking at well or better agreed with the statement, while over half (57%) of

those who rated this skill as fair or lower disagreed with the statement. Of those students rating their understanding of Spanish at well or above, 74% agreed with the statement. Those who rated their understanding of Spanish at fair or below had the largest percentage of disagreement with the statement on belonging to a group (89%). For these students understanding was essential to belonging to a group. On the other hand, for those students who rated their Spanish language skills at well or above, it was reading and writing that marked belonging to a group.

Finally students were asked to select the term they would use to describe themselves. The choices were Hispanic, American, White or Anglo, and other. Of the 132 students, 78 identified themselves as Hispanic, 49 as American, none as Anglo or White and 4 as other. Self-described Hispanics consistently rated their skills in Spanish higher than self-described Americans, as shown in Table 15.

Ethnicity	Excellent	Well	Fair	Poor	Not at all
HISPANIC					
Speak	20	37	16	3	2
Read	19	22	17	10	10
Write	17	25	9	13	14
Understand	43	25	5	3	2
AMERICAN					
Speak	11	17	8	8	5
Read	8	9	10	3	10
Write	1	14	4	7	23
Understand	18	16	11	3	1
OTHER					
Speak	0	2	0	2	0
Read	0	2	0	0	2
Write	0	2	0	0	2
Understand	0	2	1	1	0

Table 15: Ethnicity and Spanish Proficiency

Both groups had the highest ratings for their comprehension of Spanish. 87% of self-described Hispanics rated their Spanish comprehension as excellent or well; while 69% of self-described Americans rated their comprehension of Spanish at that level. With respect to speaking, 75% of Hispanics rated their speaking at excellent or well, while only 57% of Americans rated their speaking at that level. For both groups the lowest percentages were for reading and writing: 53% of Hispanics rated their reading in Spanish at that level and 54% rated their writing in Spanish at that level; 35% of Americans rated their reading at that level and 31% rated their writing at that level. 75% of those selecting other as a designation rated all their Spanish skills at excellent or well.

The majority of the students reported their English skills as excellent or good, as shown in Table 16.

Ethnicity	Excellent	Well	Fair	Poor	Not at all
HISPANIC					
Speak	45	25	6	2	0
Read	42	29	6	1	0
Write	37	33	5	3	0
Understand	48	25	2	3	0
AMERICAN					
Speak	35	12	1	1	0
Read	35	13	1	0	0
Write	29	19	1	0	0
Understand	39	9	1	0	0
OTHER					
Speak	3	1	0	0	0
Read	3	1	0	0	0
Write	3	1	0	0	0
Understand	1	2	0	0	1

Table 16: Ethnicity and English Proficiency[4]

[4] Since none of the students selected Anglo/White to identify themselves, that response is not include in this table.

Self-described Americans were proportionately more likely to rate their English language skills in all categories at a higher level than self-described Hispanics. 98% of self-described Americans rated their reading, writing and comprehension of English as excellent or well; whereas, 91% of self-described Hispanics rated their reading of English at that level with 90% rating their writing of English at that level and 94% rating their comprehension of English at that level. 100% of those who selected other as a designation rated all four language skills in English at excellent or well.

Galindo (1995) in a study of Chicano youth in Austin, Texas, found that Spanish use as well as Spanish-accented English carried the sigma of foreignness, resulting in an avoidance of Spanish by these Chicano youth. In a border community, Spanish may be more readily found in both the public and private sector. Teschner (1995) concludes that it is in fact El Paso's proximity to Juárez, Mexico that has influenced the maintentance of Spanish both publicly and privately in El Paso. While, the results of this study show that publicly and privately Spanish plays an important role for mono- and bilingual children in El Paso, it is English that is preferred.

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